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ABSTRACT

A growing number of urban school reform initiatives seeking to transform failing schools engage significant numbers of parents. Many such initiatives have succeeded in improving student academic achievement and transforming the culture of schools. This digest describes common characteristics of such projects. While the best among these projects is James Comer's School Development Program, another example is highlighted, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a national organization that operates locally in many communities around the country with notable success in many low-performing schools. The IAF is a network of broad-based multi-ethnic interfaith organizations in poor and moderate-income communities. The most successful reform initiatives are collaborations between parents and schools. The following characteristics have been seen as vital to school reform success: (1) viewing the school and community as an ecology; (2) building relationships based on common concerns; (3) acknowledging the role of power in school-community relationships; (4) fostering the collaborative leadership of principals; (5) developing and training parents and educators as leaders; and (6) monitoring and evaluating progress. It is important to recognize the impact of the local educational bureaucracy on a reform initiative. The mixed results of the plethora of reform initiatives implemented over the past several years suggest that urban schools alone cannot solve their societal problems nor address the obstacles often presented by educational bureaucracies. However, reform processes such as those implemented by the IAF, have had significant positive impacts on schools. Initiatives that mobilize community resources and institutions, engage parents and educators, and use power effectively offer the best possibility for addressing the serious problems faced by schools and communities. (Contains 19 references.) (SLD)

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PARENT ENGAGEMENT AS A SCHOOL REFORM STRATEGY

A growing number of urban school reform initiatives seeking to transform failing schools engage significant numbers of parents. The initiatives strive to change a school's culture; the quality of relationships among educators, parents, and children; and students' educational outcomes. The initiatives work toward effecting systemic change in a school, and they situate their reform efforts within the context of the surrounding community. Further, since schools alone cannot solve the problems imported into them from society, some projects reach beyond schools; they draw upon the power of community institutions, such as churches and civic groups, to improve schools and aspects of life in the community that impact education. Successful systemic initiatives usually result in an increase in the quantity and quality of the various forms of parent involvement identified by Epstein (1995), such as parent volunteers in the school, and parents helping their children with homework.

Many such initiatives have succeeded in improving student academic achievement and transforming the culture of schools (Lewis, 1997; Murnane & Levy, 1996). This digest describes the common characteristics of such projects. While the best among the projects is James Comer's School Development Program, another example is highlighted here: the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a national organization that operates locally in many communities around the country, and whose successes to date in low-performing schools are encouraging. Begun over 50 years ago by Saul Alinsky, IAF is a national network of broad-based multi-ethnic interfaith organizations in economically poor and moderate-income communities. IAF works with communities to gain the power to improve the lives of their members, including the education of their children.

Characteristics of Successful Initiatives

The most successful reform initiatives are collaborations between parents and schools. Typically, a group of local institutions, sometimes with the aid of foundation funds, hires an organizer—possibly from an organization like the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)—to initiate and facilitate the reform process. Through conversations with many individuals and groups, the organizer helps to identify a core organizing team of 8-15 parents and educators that usually coordinates the work of the others involved. Such collaborative initiatives share certain characteristics, described below.

Viewing the School and Community as an Ecology

The initiators of collaborative reform projects tend to view a school and its surrounding neighborhood as a part of an interdependent social ecology that must be understood as a whole in order to identify problems and develop solutions (Heckman, 1996a; Murnane & Levy, 1996; Lewis, 1997). They address the ways that the strengths and difficulties in a school and neighborhood can affect each other and the children in both contexts.

The projects often marshal the political strength of the residents and the institutions in a community, such as churches and civic organizations, to obtain needed reforms and resources for the school. For example, parents and faculty at Zavalla Elementary School in Austin, Texas, worked with a local IAF organization to obtain funding and cut through bureaucratic red tape to establish a health clinic at the school. Children had often missed school because of illnesses and long waits for appointments at community health clinics. Once the school clinic opened, attendance increased significantly (Murnane & Levy, 1996). Perhaps more importantly, the relationships and trust that parents and teachers developed through their work together encouraged them to tackle the more contentious issue of students' low achievement without blaming each other.

Projects also work to make the values, cultures, and languages of the various components of a child's ecology—home, school, and neighborhood—more continuous. In the Educational and Community Change Project (ECC) in Arizona (which joined forces with a local IAF organization), the staff altered the curriculum of the project's schools so that economically poor Latino and Native American parents and students join together with middle-class teachers of diverse ethnic backgrounds to study issues of concern to the community. Their joint inquiry permits the worlds of the school, home, and neighborhood to come together (Heckman, 1996a; Lewis, 1997).

Attention to the social ecology of a school and its neighborhood responds to the important concerns raised by Lareau and Shumar (1997) about the individualist approach to family-school relationships pervasive in educational policy. The authors note that most schools attempt to engage individual parents without considering how differences in education, income, social networks, and positions of power can affect their ability or willingness to participate. The result is that parents from working and lower class groups are less likely to become involved in school-related activities.

The projects described here, however, invite *groups* of parents to reflect critically upon the education of their children, and to take action as *citizens* to make needed changes in their schools and communities. Such an approach can be affirming and can increase participants' awareness of their collective power. It contrasts significantly with the strategies of other parent involvement projects which invite the participation of *individual* parents as *consumers* of education (Vincent, 1996), or in some cases, as "at-risk" parents, which implicitly suggests a view of parents as patients in need of treatment by educators and school mental health professionals (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). These latter approaches keep parents isolated from each other in their concerns, and dependent on the expertise and good will of educators.

Building Relationships Based on Common Concerns

The foundation of the work of successful initiatives consists

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of building relationships among parents, educators, community leaders, and public officials. Such relationships foster increased involvement, and create resources such as trust, information channels, and shared norms among people that are essential to transforming schools (Coleman, 1990).

Sharing Concerns. Organizers of community-school initiatives spend considerable time talking with parents and educators to learn about their personal concerns for their children's school. It is an effort to develop trust and build a culture of conversation that leads to action as people form relationships based on common concerns. IAF organizers, for example, conduct a "situational audit," which gives everyone in the school the opportunity to identify its positive and negative aspects. They identify areas of overlapping self-interest with other parents and, if possible, with educators at a school. Organizers also sponsor "neighborhood walks," in which parents and educators gather at a school and then go out to visit parents at home; the aim is to engage families in conversation about their concerns for the school and community (Cortes, 1994).

Organizers foster relationships in group forums as well. For example, voluntary weekly dialogues among teachers, teachers' aides, and the principal of a school are at the heart of the work of ECC. Participants discuss their beliefs and ideas about their work, and initiate efforts to co-create the curriculum with parents (Heckman, 1996a).

Parents and educators also meet together to identify common concerns, decide which to focus on, and develop a strategy for addressing them. IAF calls these sessions "house meetings." ECC calls this process "indigenous invention," explaining that "teachers, parents, children, and other community members must be the inventors of their social worlds" (Heckman, 1996a, pp. 52-53). Discovering that others think similarly about the education of children in a particular school energizes parents and educators to work together on improvements. Through involvement in these meetings, parents also learn more about their supportive role in their child's education, and teachers learn more about the lives of the children in their classrooms.

Taking Action. Next, action committees develop strategies to address specific concerns. Members first meet with public officials, academics, business leaders, and others who have information about the issue on which they are working. They then develop plans of action to resolve problems, and present them at a neighborhood meeting for ratification by the larger community. They may also hold accountability sessions, where a large number of parents and educators meet with public officials to ask for their support or action on a particular issue.

Acknowledging the Role of Power in School-Community Relationships

An understanding of the complex ways in which power, or "the ability to act," influences education is central to the approach of a successful collaborative initiative. Diverse projects, including the School Development Program, IAF, the Family Matters Project (Cochran & Dean, 1991), and ECC, acknowledge the influence of power relations on the way children are educated. Some focus more on the dynamics within schools where parents often are marginalized (Comer, 1980), while others examine the impact of the social and political context of the schools as well. IAF conducts a formal "power analysis" that identifies the self-interests of the different groups and individuals in a particular education bureaucracy and the relative power that each has over educational policy and practices. The purpose is to understand how to influence these various groups to make decisions beneficial to students in their schools.

Power analyses frequently reveal parents' absence from the processes of educational decision-making. Thus, many initiatives work with parents to develop their power, which they can use in school reform collaborations. IAF, along with several other initiatives, promotes the goal of changing the culture of schools from one of "unilateral" or "command and control" type of power, which they see as predominant in today's schools, to one of "relational power" among educators, parents, and community members, which grows out of collaboration and conversation (Comer, 1980; Cochran & Dean, 1991; Heckman, 1996a).

A key to parents' development of personal power in the work of IAF is the "iron rule": "Do not do for others what they can do for themselves" (Cortes, 1994). The rationale for the rule is that parents become aware of their own capabilities as they assume responsibilities, and develop the confidence to take on increasingly challenging tasks to transform their children's schools. ECC and IAF have observed that when parents demonstrate their power in achieving positive changes for a school, teachers view parents with greater trust and respect (Lewis, 1997).

Given that educators and parents often begin efforts to reform schools with marked differences in power and self-interest, organizations outside of the school system can coach participants toward greater collaboration. Political organizations like IAF, educational advocacy groups like the Public Education Association in New York City and the Public Education Fund in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and universities like the University of Arizona (which works with ECC) and Yale University (which works with the School Development Program) are examples of types of organizations that can fill this role.

Fostering the Collaborative Leadership of Principals

As the chief executive officer of a school, a principal's willingness and ability to engage in a collaborative process of reform is essential to the success of the initiative (Cortes, 1994; Heckman, 1996a; Smylie, Crowson, Chou, & Levin, 1996). Since educational bureaucracies typically are more conducive to unilateral, command-and-control leadership than collaborative leadership, reformers usually must seek out and cultivate principals who are open to examining and changing their style of leadership. IAF has found the greatest success with principals who "do not want to be compliance officers, but who want instead to be educational leaders and entrepreneurs" (Cortes, 1994, p. 13).

Being an educational entrepreneur involves creating an environment where teachers and parents feel safe enough to take risks, and even to fail, in an effort to create positive change (Cortes, 1994; Heckman, 1996a; Murnane & Levy, 1996). One risk that runs counter to the socialization of principals and to the culture of most schools, yet is crucial to collaborative reform, is sharing information about the school with parents. Although there exists a fear that parents might be troublemakers who would make decisions that teachers oppose (Heckman, 1996a), in fact, if parents do not know about a school's problems they cannot contribute their considerable energy and resources—their power—to resolving them. At the same time, trust must be developed between parents and educators to reduce the likelihood of each blaming the other for the problems.

Collaborative leadership also involves principals' sharing the responsibilities of leadership with teachers and parents who have been identified as leaders. Such a shift from wielding unilateral power to building relational power may not be easy for principals, but can provide them with support and relief.

A reform-minded principal must also be able to work effectively in two very different cultures: the ongoing hierarchy of the broader educational bureaucracy in which the school is embedded, and the evolving collaborative activities in the school. Thus, the principal needs to know how to negotiate the

bureaucracy to attract and keep resources, such as skilled, dedicated teachers and funds, and, also, how to prevent institutional regulations from interfering with the process of school change.

Principals in collaborative reform projects need support from other like-minded administrators, given that their colleagues in the broader educational bureaucracy tend to be skeptical and critical of principals working closely and collaboratively with parents and the community. Principals in IAF-sponsored reform projects in Texas meet together in workshops on changing the culture at their schools. They also attend city- and statewide meetings of parents, community leaders, and educators to gain recognition of their achievements in reforming education and to pressure public officials to make decisions to support their efforts. These meetings offer reinforcement and encouragement for principals who may be viewed as maverick and even disruptive by their more bureaucratic colleagues.

Developing and Training Parents and Educators as Leaders

Creating systemic change in a school is labor-intensive, and requires the sustained efforts of many people: parents, teachers, administrators, community members, and the staffs of outside organizations. For this reason, projects spend significant time and energy on identifying and nurturing leaders, defined by IAF as people with a following who can build networks of relationships and are able to motivate and recruit people to accomplish a task (Cortes, 1994).

Training Participants to Improve Education. Projects also devote considerable time to training and mentoring to ensure that all participants develop the skills needed to reform education. IAF offers national 10-day training sessions three times a year, where participants develop their skills as leaders and organizers of change in communities. In these sessions and in local training events, IAF helps participants develop organizing skills, such as recruitment of new leaders, team building, and effective conversation, negotiation, and compromise (Cortes, 1994). Training focused on education organizing covers additional material on what students need to learn in schools in order to become productive citizens in today's economy, how the educational system works, what characteristics define a good school, and how to create a collaborative culture in schools.

Training Participants to Resolve Conflicts. This training, in the context of ongoing mentoring relationships in local schools and communities, develops the skills to negotiate and compromise when the self-interests and values of parents, educators, members of the community, and public officials conflict. For example, a conflict arises when administrators are reluctant to publicize negative information about their school's performance, such as low achievement scores, or present it in a way that only the most highly-educated parents can understand, even though the information is crucial to parents' meaningful involvement in school change (Murnane & Levy, 1996). The collaboration of a large number of parents and teachers who trust each other and have been trained in negotiation also mitigates concerns that one group of parents may come to exert absolute control over a school, overruling educators and other parents on issues such as grading, classroom placement, and curriculum (Casanova, 1996).

Monitoring and Evaluating Progress

Unfortunately, a prevalent pattern in schools in low-income communities is a lack of accountability for poor educational achievement (Public Education Association, 1997). Parents and, in many cases, teachers and school counselors often do not even know the achievement data for their schools. If they know the data, they often do not understand their significance for students' future educational and employment options.

A cornerstone of the work of successful collaborative reform projects is to increase parents' and teachers' awareness and understanding of educational outcomes such as achievement scores, attendance, and dropout rates, and to enable them to monitor the impact of their reform efforts on these outcomes (Lewis, 1997). IAF also suggests monitoring less tangible indicators such as attitudes toward teaching and learning, and the social climate at a school, by listening to the tone and content of people's conversations in the hallways and classrooms.

The Tying Webs Initiative in Grand Rapids has developed a list of 25 indicators of "progress and success" for schools and communities. They were chosen collaboratively by a team of educators, parents, and business and community leaders based on focus groups with key constituencies. They include measures of student attainment, organizational and instructional effectiveness, community and parental support, and elimination of discrimination. Data on the indicators are gathered annually and reported to the community (Grand Rapids Strategic Plan, 1992).

The Importance of Context

It is important to recognize the impact of the local educational bureaucracy on a reform initiative. Though educational bureaucracies tend to be resistant to widespread and active parent involvement in educational decision-making (Cibulka, 1996), some locales are more resistant than others. Organizations which can establish a collaborative relationship with higher levels of the educational bureaucracy, such as state or city departments of education, usually have an easier time gaining entry into a local school and beginning the process of collaboration (Murnane & Levy, 1996). Also, initiatives involving a university-school partnership, such as the School Development Project and ECC, begin inside of schools, and so do not have to fight to gain entry (Comer, 1980; Heckman, 1996a, b). Conversely, initiatives located in settings that are highly resistant to parent involvement tend to rely on strategies of confrontation to have an impact on schools (Ross, 1997).

The differences in the challenges faced by IAF organizations in New York City and Texas exemplify the significance of context to an initiative's approaches. The Texas Interfaith Education Fund, a local IAF organization, through a long process involving confrontation and collaboration, has established a collaborative relationship with the Texas State Department of Education. The state has allocated several million dollars to be awarded to schools selected by IAF as Alliance Schools, where IAF organizers work to engage educators and the community in collaborative reform (Murnane & Levy, 1996). By contrast, the New York City IAF must deal with the much larger, more complex and bureaucratic New York City education system, with its powerful unions, competing interest groups, and large amounts of money at stake. The local IAF organizations there have established three new high schools with the New York City Board of Education, but for the most part, IAF remains outside of schools, and must confront and challenge the Board through demonstrations and media campaigns to become more accountable to parents for the quality of education in city schools.

Conclusion

The mixed results of the plethora of reform initiatives implemented over the past several years suggest that urban schools alone cannot solve the societal problems imported into them, nor can they alone address the daunting obstacles often presented by educational bureaucracies. However, the process of

reform described in this digest, as exemplified by the Industrial Areas Foundation, has had a significant positive impact on schools. In Texas, two years after the IAF's Alliance Schools initiative began, three-fourths of the schools increased their scores on the state assessment test (Lewis, 1997). In New York, IAF organizations have created three new public schools with more collaborative approaches to education, have mobilized large numbers of parents to participate in and lead reform initiatives, and have had an impact on city-wide educational policy through a media campaign to publicize the retention of superintendents and principals in "Educational Dead Zones," with years of poorly-performing schools.

Thus, it appears that collaborative initiatives, such as those led by IAF, which mobilize local community resources and institutions, engage parents and educators in a process of critical reflection about their schools, and use power effectively, offer the best possibility for addressing the very serious problems faced by schools and communities today.

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